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# Exploration of Mnemonics for ESL/EFL Vocabulary: Employing the Depth and Elaboration of Processing Theory

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Sound, form, meaning, and usage are four essentials of a word. English is alphabetic in its writing system. A word's pronunciation is usually connected with its form; however, the relationship between sound and meaning has been controversial throughout the ages. Vocabulary mnemonics differ from each other in their primary focus of attention. Utilizing the Depth and Elaboration of Processing Theory (hereafter, "DEPT"), (Craik & Lockhart, 1972; Craik & Tulving, 1975), we conducted research regarding major ESL/EFL vocabulary mnemonics. We classified vocabulary mnemonics into shallow- and deep-encoding types, analyzed the advantages and disadvantage of each mnemonic, and concluded that the combined mnemonic is more effective.

## 1. Shallow-encoding mnemonics

The mnemonics that pay more attention to a word's phonological or spelling features are shallow-encoding mnemonics. The keyword method is a very typical shallow-encoding mnemonic popular in western countries.

Shallow-encoding mnemonics frequently used by Chinese EFL learners are these: a) Pronunciation; b) Homophonic mnemonic; c) Familiar-word mnemonic; and d) Repetition.

The *pronunciation mnemonic* is a method of mastering the correct pronunciation of a new word and reading the word aloud to facilitate its recall. The primary emphasis of the mnemonic is on the phonetic aspect of a new word rather than the semantic association between the new word and its definition. Because English employs an alphabetic writing system, the form of a word is closely related to its pronunciation. Mastering the pronunciation could facilitate the recall of its form. "Say the new word aloud, and saying it right, is half the battle in feeling comfortable and assured with all the new words you are going to retain" (Lewis, 1978, p. xvi). Therefore, what comes first in ESL/EFL vocabulary teaching is the instruction of correct pronunciation.

*Homophonic mnemonic* is a kind of

interlingual associations, which is similar to the keyword method mentioned above. For instance, to memorize "lobster," we can make a use of the homophonic word "老不死的" (= be old but not dead) in Chinese, and devise such a mnemonic "老不死的龙虾" (= an old but not dead lobster), (Li, 1991, p. 45). Wang (1998) and Lv (2001) found that ESL learners seldom used the mnemonic most probably because Chinese and English are not cognate languages and it is very hard to find a Chinese word which is similar to the English word in both sound and meaning.

ESL/EFL learners often make use of a familiar English word—or part of the word—to memorize a new English word, which is called *familiar-word mnemonic*. "Word in word" phenomenon is very common in English. For example, to memorize "dapple" and "dwarf," we can use familiar words "apple" and "war" in them (Li,

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1994). Compared with the morphological, the major advantage of the familiar-word mnemonic is that the former takes a large number of roots and affixes, which are unfamiliar to learners; although the latter focuses on familiar words embedded in new words, i.e., the known information is integrated with new words, which greatly decreases the memory load.

Some ESL/EFL learners usually read and write the to-be-remembered words over and over to memorize new words, i.e. *repetition*. Chinese EFL learners used the rote mnemonic to help them memorize EFL words (Wang, 1998). The nature of the cognitive memory is semantic. New words would be easier to remember if they were viewed in light of old schemata. Words learned by rote are isolated from their relations with other knowledge, i.e., the relevant schemata are not utilized. Thus, they could

be easily forgotten. Wu and Wang (1998) found that repetition was the least efficient, but it was indispensable for most learners in learning vocabulary.

To facilitate the recall of new English words or phrases, some ESL/EFL learners use self-made word lists, or vocabulary notebooks or cards, i.e.

*word-list mnemonic*. Usually the main information of the word list is new words and their definitions, and the list serves as a tool for rehearsing. Wang (1998) found that

the use of such a word-list mnemonic was the lowest in frequency

, but it

significantly correlated with the learners' performance in word recall tests. Compared with the contextual mnemonic discussed below, the learning of words through bilingual word-lists should be rejected mainly because words that have been learned from a list are easily mixed up (so-called "lumping"). For the consolidation of word knowledge, Shouten-van Parreren (1985) recommended working with "context cards".

## 2. Deep-encoding mnemonics

The mnemonics that focus on a word's semantic attributes are deep-encoding mnemonics. Deep encodings achieve better retention than shallow ones. In western countries, deep-encoding mnemonics mainly include the morphological or etymological approach, and the semantic mnemonic, which is a general term for vocabulary mnemonics such as contextual mnemonic, practice, imagery, and association. The major advantage of the semantic mnemonic is that it is beneficial over long time periods (Crow & Quigley, 1985), which conforms to the DEPT. Deep-encoding mnemonics common among Chinese EFL learners are these: a) morphological approach; b) contextual mnemonic; c) practice; d) imagery; and e) association.

ESL/EFL learners memorize lists of roots and affixes, and their general meanings to construct or derive words correctly, or to figure out words by recognizing their structure, which is the *morphological or etymological approach*. The

approach accords with cognitive economy, which is why the approach is universally accepted as the quickest, most useful, and easiest way to increase word power. Most recent vocabulary mnemonic books (e.g., Liu, 1997) have been written or edited based on the morphological and/or etymological theory. Although it is scientific, the mnemonic has its limitations, especially when compared with the familiar-word mnemonic above.

To assist comprehension or recall, ESL/EFL

learners place a word in a meaningful linguistic context, which is the *contextual*

*Simultaneously, the conclusion confirms a popular view in cognitive psychology, i.e., the more associations we make between to-be-remembered items and our existing cognitive structure, the more efficient our learning is in terms of retention.*

*mnemonic*. Mao (2004) vividly described the relationship between words and context as that between fish and water. In context, we can not only learn a word's referential meaning, but also gain some knowledge about its syntactic, pragmatic, and associative meaning, i.e., the usage of a word which is the last essential for a word as stated above. Studies (e.g., Wu & Wang, 1998) showed that the mnemonic was the most effective, which explained why the test-oriented books about English vocabulary edited by Mao (e.g., 2004) were among the best sellers for college EFL learners in China. What's more, it could remedy the defects of the word-list mnemonic discussed above.

*Practice* means that ESL/EFL learners put new words to work at once, e.g., use them in speaking and/or writing, do vocabulary exercises, or talk about them with someone. Wang (1998) found that Chinese EFL learners frequently used the practice mnemonic which was the most efficient among other mnemonics. Practice makes perfect, which may be the reason why most publications concerning word power provide their readers with a large number of various exercises. The mnemonic is based on comprehension rather than on rote.

ESL/EFL learners use visual images to understand and remember new words, which is *imagery*. The mnemonic requires to understand the meaning of a word first, then to imagine the meaning's shape, or to associate one's experience

related to the word's meaning, or to generate an interesting, stimulating or fantastic image about the word. As for generating images, some researchers (e.g., Yao, 1992) set up Chinese image systems as medium to strengthen the vocabulary memory.

By *association* ESL/EFL learners link ideas contained in new words with known L2 information, e.g., with their synophones, synforms, synonyms or antonyms. One problem with the mnemonic is that when words like synophones are put together, most learners get confused about their meanings. Thus further mnemonics are needed to differentiate one from another. A female postgraduate in China described how she memorized the spelling distinction of two synophones and synforms: "Only one letter was different between 'fRagrant' and 'fLagrant.' I felt difficult to tell its differences in meaning. Later, I imagined the first 'r' in 'fRagrant' as a flower, which is 'fRagrant', and the letter 'l' in 'fLagrant' as a shovel for scraping droppings, which is 'fLagrant' . "

Based on the DEPT, elaboration at all levels would enhance memory more than that of any one level alone. In other words, using a shallow-encoding mnemonic would provide an initial link between an L2 word and its meaning in L1; whereas, employing a deep-encoding mnemonic would further fix the semantic association within existing knowledge structures. If this is the case, then, as a result of our library research and careful analysis, the combination of the two methods, i.e., the combined mnemonic of shallow- and deep-encoding mnemonics, should produce better results than either on its own. Perhaps this is the reason why *Vocabulary 22000* (Liu, 1997) has been best received by Chinese EFL learners (Lv, 2001). Dong (2001) verified this point through her teaching experiment. In fact, to have a best retention of a new word most of the ESL/EFL learners use a

combination of mnemonics to memorize a new word (Wang, 1998; Lv, 2001). In Lv's (1999) study, a male sophomore majoring in English narrated his personal story of remembering the new word "unforthcoming": "To memorize 'unforthcoming,' I made two sentences, a Chinese one and an English one: '不强迫他就不出来, 就是不热心的' (i.e., 'He won't come out until you force him, which shows he is *unforthcoming*.'); and 'My mother is never *unforthcoming* to guests.' " (p. 53).

By studying the interviewees' manuscripts (*ibid.*), we found that those who had adopted combined mnemonics made fewer spelling mistakes than those who had employed individual mnemonic. Usually the former had a very deep impression about the spelling and the meaning of a new word; what's more, they could write down the word quickly and correctly. We could see that the combined mnemonic is more effective in memorizing new words. We would like to mention that the conclusion has been tested and verified by the first author (Lv, 2000) through conducting a teaching experiment of mnemonics for ESL/EFL difficult words. Simultaneously, the conclusion confirms a popular view in cognitive psychology, i.e., the more associations we make between to-be-remembered items and our existing cognitive structure, the more efficient our learning is in terms of retention. We encourage future researchers to pay attention to the particular role that vocabulary mnemonics play in ESL/EFL multimodal reading and writing, e.g., looking at the changing role of writing on screen, in particular how the visual character of writing and the increasingly dominant role of image unsettle and decenter the predominance of words in the 21st century.

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